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The neoliberal academic: illustrating shifting academic norms in an age of hyper-performativity

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Abstract

Neoliberalism is invariably presented as a governing regime of market and competition-based systems rather than as a set of migratory practices that are re-setting the ethical standards of the academy. This paper seeks to explore the way in which neoliberalism is shifting the prevailing values of the academy **by** drawing on two illustrations: the death of disinterestedness and the obfuscation of authorship. While there was never a golden age when norms such as disinterestedness were universally practiced they represented widely accepted aesthetic ideals associated with academic life. By contrast, neoliberal academics embrace a new set of assumptions and norms that stand in sharp relief to many of the values that were previously espoused. Practices that might have been regarded as ethically dubious by earlier generations of academics, such as grantsmanship, self-justificatory expressions of interestedness and tangential claims to authorship, are now regarded as legitimate and positive virtues in a more aggressive age of hyper-performativity.

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Introduction

The ways in which ethics plays out within the academy is almost invariably represented in dramatic terms through highly publicized plagiarism cases or the falsification of data (Nurunnabi and Hossain, 2019). This is the default definition of ‘academic integrity’. It is misrepresented as merely avoiding ethical failure, like plagiarism or falsification of data, rather than as achieving ethical excellence.

However, it is important to understand the ethical norms of the academy in more subtly shifting terms beyond the ubiquitous mantra of research misconduct (Falsification, Fabrication and Plagiarism or FFP). Instead, the nature of academic norms needs to be understood as part of a changing set of professional behaviors and assumptions linked to the effects of post-modernism, neoliberalism and performativity. It is important to reflect on the changing parameters in which academic norms are modulated or blurred ‘to accommodate contemporary occupational demands’ (Chubb and Watermeyer, 2017:2361-2362).

In understanding the shifting landscape of ethical norms within the academy, neoliberalism operates, not just as a governing regime of market and competition-based systems but as a ‘set of migratory practices’ (Ong, 2007:4). This is about neoliberalism with a small ‘n’ as opposed to neoliberalism with a big ‘N’. Hence, neoliberalism is about more than governmentality since it is also about the alterations to the way in which the free subjects of neoliberalism behave (Ong, 2007:4). Many of its assumptions are now an established part of academic life. They have been learned, practiced and already passed down to another generation: the importance of obtaining research grants from prestigious funding organisations; pursuing a research agenda largely shaped by such organisations and universities keen to orientate the academics

towards meeting society's so-called 'grand challenges'; and entering into the personal marketing and self-promotion of academic work to prove the 'impact' of one's scholarship are notable examples. These practices, and the values that underpin them aid what Oleksiyenko (2018:195) has described as 'the neoliberal advancement of forcefully self-promoting scientists'. These are the beneficiaries of neoliberalism rather than the victims that are normally portrayed.

In a post-welfare society the emphasis on individual responsibility, sometimes termed 'responsibilisation' (Rose, 1990), has led to rising expectations that citizens will self-manage and care for themselves on the basis that this enhances their individual autonomy. In health policy individuals are expected to manage their own illnesses whilst in university life there is now a widespread acceptance that to be a 'good' academic there is a responsibility to be a productive worker who publishes high quality scholarship, obtains research grants and achieves teaching 'excellence'. Responsibilisation further means that institutions encourage academics to understand these performative expectations as a duty in order to serve and protect the university in an increasingly competitive environment for student recruitment and government funding.

Post-modernism manifests itself in the rejection of the modernist science project and the de-legitimation of the pursuit of truth as the aim of academic endeavour. It promotes what Barnett (1990) has referred to as epistemological undermining of the higher education curriculum. The pursuit of truth and the importance of maintaining an intellectual disinterestedness in order to totalize and universalize is now regarded as hopelessly naïve, failing to acknowledge the hierarchies and power structures that exclude knowledge in modern cultures. The focus on de-colonisation of the

curriculum is perhaps one of the most notable illustrations of the epistemological undermining of the modernist curriculum now widely regarded by critics as too white and too Western (e.g. Connell, 2007).

Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between three types of capital: economic, social and cultural and later added a fourth, symbolic capital. In academic life these may be thought of as *academic capitalism* through control over economic resources such as research grants, income from consultancy or possibly an invention, and the physical infrastructure of a room, building or laboratory (economic capital); *academic cronyism* via formal and informal membership of prestigious academic networks and societies that provide connections and sources of influence (social capital); *academic in-breeding* leading to tacit knowledge of the conventions associated with how to behave and gain advantages in the academic milieu (cultural capital); and, finally, *academic prestige* through forms of formal recognition, such as professorships or prizes for academic achievement the most visible of which are Nobel prizes and Fields Medals (symbolic capital). Whilst these forms of capital have always existed in academic life, performative pressures within the global academy have extended and deepened their corrupting effects in recent years.

This paper will present illustrations of the way ethical norms have migrated, re-shaped by the forces of neoliberalism and post-modernism. In so doing it will demonstrate how fundamental values in academic life, such as disinterestedness, have been displaced by new ethical norms. These new norms provide the basis for contemporary academic prestige that have heightened the importance of ‘the many outcomes and outputs of university activity’ (Blackmore, 2016:153), such as publications and research grants. The measurement of this hyper-performativity has

resulted in the emergence of the neoliberal academic. It is a system that embraces the legitimacy of competition and the assumptions of the market in the continuous evaluation of the hyper-productive academic.

The death of disinterestedness

The academic norm of disinterestedness refers to the pursuit of truth uninhibited by bias or presupposition. As such it has been perhaps the cornerstone ethical norm in academic life since the enlightenment. Yet, disinterestedness is now increasingly undermined by the twin forces of post-modernism and neoliberalism. The pursuit of the truth as a modernist goal has been replaced with increased productivity to create many versions of the truth, each with an equal claim to validity. A detailed explanation of disinterestedness, drawing on the liberal tradition of higher education, is offered by Moberly (1949:63-64):

the academic thinker must have a completely open field and he should approach it with a mind free from antecedent bias or presupposition. For him all questions are open, all assumptions tentative, all conclusions provisional. There is no fixed framework of thought within which he must operate, no authoritative premises which must be the starting point of his reasoning and which it would be impious to question. He may and must follow the argument whithersoever it leads.

Hence, disinterestedness is tightly linked to the importance of critical thinking in higher education in the sense of a continuous questioning of all claims to knowledge. Disinterestedness implies not just intellectual independence but an unyielding, almost

brutal, honesty about one's own methods, theories and findings. It is about self-denial, the suppression of the ego for the good of serving science as a community.

Disinterestedness is probably most closely associated with the work of Robert Merton (1942) as expressed via the 'D' in his well-known C.U.D.O.S. acronymⁱ. There is a long history of discussing disinterestedness in the literature on university and intellectual life variously (and synonymously) represented as a value, a virtue or a norm. It has an important place in European intellectual history and is represented in the work of influential philosophical figures such as Kant, Schopenhauer and Popper. Flexner (1930: 223) refers to 'scholarship and science in the most disinterested form' as taking place in English universities and in antedating their establishment. Matthew Arnold was influential in arguing that disinterestedness was one of the most important intellectual virtues which he described himself as 'self-annulment' (Arnold, 1993: 144), an expression of Victorian high culture. In the nineteenth century, much academic and scientific work took place outside of the universities, indicative of the way the values of science or academe were shaped without the university and arguably perverted by the university's much later, and belated, interest in research promoted by the pragmatic concerns of government funding.

At this time the threat to disinterestedness was seen as emanating from the established Church as the main sponsor of university education rather than increasing interference or direction of science policy from government or business sponsorship as it might be perceived today. Writing in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Philip Hamerton declared that disinterestedness was the most essential of the moral virtues to an intellectual life (Hamerton, 1910:62). Hamerton argued that the thinking of

scholars ‘can never be disinterested so long as their ruling motive is devotion to the interests of their Church.’ (Hamerton, 1910: 63-64). Max Weber (1973:17) rails against the way that ‘ecclesiastical acceptability’ (Weber, 1973:17) places limits on academic freedom in German universities and is a stern critic of the appointment of professors according to the criteria of religious adherence at the University of Strassburg in 1901 (Weber, 1973: 14).

Disinterestedness is about a rejection of subjective self-interest and a desire for an aesthetic and highly disciplined form of intellectual honesty. Yet, precisely the antithesis of this norm, represented by both interestedness and grantsmanship, has largely replaced disinterestedness as a modern academic virtue. Interestedness has come to the fore through an increasingly self-conscious ‘identity insiderism’ (Merton, 1972:103). Here, the legitimacy of the researcher is established not by their claim to disinterestedness but precisely the opposite value: a deep and personal connection to the matter being investigated. This means that only female sociologists can understand the experience of women, ‘only black historians can truly understand black history’ (Merton, 1972:103) and only working class ethnographers can understand the experiences of the poor, and so on. Cousin (2010:9) has described this state of affairs as a ‘positional piety’ that now means that the moral authority of the researcher flows from their close affinity with the research subject (Cousin, 2010:9). This new form of confessional privilege has come to replace the notion of the moral authority of the researcher as stemming from their distance, objectivity and academic expertise. Positionality statements, as part of methodological sections of papers and theses, represent a defense of partiality in research. Rather than a weakness this is now seen as a positive strength. The introduction of confessional privilege is seen as

making the research in some sense more authentic and trustworthy. In this manner, interestedness has become a new orthodoxy in the social sciences.

Grantsmanship, is another contemporary virtue that stands in polar opposite to disinterestedness. This is now essential for promotion to higher academic ranks, including full professor. 'Get grants or perish' is fast replacing 'publish or perish' as the key performance practice of the academy under pressure from senior managers and administrators who, in turn, are responding to the tight financial environment prevalent in many higher education systems (Musambira, *et al*, 2012). While such expectations have long applied to academics working in the natural sciences such pressure is now experienced across all disciplines, including the humanities and social sciences. Grantsmanship is known to have a number of effects including redirecting energy away from the pursuit of research through the time-consuming nature of applying for funds. It is also widely seen as encouraging conservative research and cronyism due to the concentration of funding in the hands of an elite (Berezin, 1998). Yet, despite these pernicious effects, grantsmanship is seen as a virtuous professional skill that academics need to learn in order to thrive (e.g. Gotley, 2000).

The template for being a neoliberal academic is detailed by universities in the way in which they now define being 'research-active' academic. Such a status, essential to academic prestige and the maintenance of career prospects, is defined in terms of just three activities: producing 'outputs' (such as journal papers and books) judged to be of a high quality in national research evaluation exercises, the generation of research income external to the institution, and supervising doctoral students to completion. Universities, especially in Australia and the UK where performance management systems are advanced according to neoliberal principles, define research-active in

terms of these three activities (e.g. ACU, 2018; Griffith University, 2018). It is thus clear that grantsmanship is core to how research is now defined. Essentially such neoliberal definitions of research mean that without successful grantsmanship an academic no longer qualifies as ‘research-active’ regardless of their contribution to advancing knowledge in their field through publication.

There has been a subtle but clear shift in the vocabulary used to describe research that is carried out by academics who are not in receipt of funding. Formerly such research was referred to through a positive lexicon of phrases such as ‘independent research’, ‘pure research’ or ‘scholarly investigation’ indicating a form of research that ‘does not always lend itself to organized efforts and is refractory to direction from above.’ (Bush, 1945: 81). Jaspers (1959:55) used the term ‘intellectual research’ as a way of describing deep philosophical reflection in any field. Now such work is disparaged or othered via the use of a negative lexicon of terms such as ‘unfunded research’ or ‘curiosity-driven research’. Carrying out such work is no longer seen as high status but as somehow inconsequential, trivial or self-indulgent since it is not generating research income, even though the majority of such funding fails to cover the costs associated with the time of the researcher and the facilities and resources they use. The attainment of funded research is now a core part of how academic prestige is perceived (Blackmore, 2016:32) something that is increasingly highlighted within the academic CV, transformed from a historical record into a tool for self-promotion in response to the forces of neoliberalism (Macfarlane, 2018).

There was a long and slow struggle to promote the importance of research in the British university. In Truscot’s (1943) powerful critique he argued that ‘the life of a well-established, middle-aged professor in the Arts faculty of a modern university

can, if he likes to make it so, be one of the softest jobs to be found on the earth's surface' (1943: 71). Despite Truscot's concern that research needed to be taken more seriously in British universities he agreed with Flexner's critique (1930) that too much research that is undertaken is of a trivial nature or fails to place sufficient intellectual demands on the researcher. Truscot (1943:107-108) refers to the 'prostitution of research by the choice of unworthy subjects' and the 'the insistence of research of a trivial kind'. He quotes approvingly from Herrenden-Harker's (1935:112) distinction between those that 'grub for facts' and 'those who strive for enlightenment' arguing that it is the latter who are the real researchers. This acerbic comment directed at what we might now call empirical research turns on its head how we perceive the contemporary prestige economy of academic life where funded empirical research is seen as higher in status to forms of research and scholarship that are 'non-empirical'. It is an attitude echoed in the views of A.H. Haley (1957:142) with respect to the differences between British and American sociology during the 1950s in which he contrasts the 'more humanistic' approach of the small pocket of British sociologists during this time with the 'frantic empiricism' of a much bigger community of scholars on the other side of the Atlantic.

While it has been claimed that disinterestedness is a myth built in the nineteenth century on the enduring story of the publication of *On the Origin of Species* which was driven, at least in part, by Darwin's moral passions (Harman, 2011), its enduring appearance in the history of science and academe suggests that it is an espoused value of hugely symbolic importance. This does not mean that disinterestedness has always been adhered to any more than the theory of just and unjust wars might imply that warfare has always been conducted according to just war principles. At the very least

it was a principle of academic life that was regularly asserted if not always practiced. However, critically, it was a principle that was widely perceived as a cornerstone of what it meant to be an academic, a position that is now rarely espoused.

The obfuscation of authorship

The death of disinterestedness has been accompanied by a rapid expansion in publication activity by academics. This has become an increasingly pragmatic necessity for career initiation let alone its further development. Such expectations though have a relatively recent history, particularly in a British context, but are now advanced in their implications for security of employment in academic life. The rise in publication productivity has been startling and cannot be assigned simply to greater opportunities to collaborate afforded by the development of the internet or advances in research methods. Publication is now seen as an essential activity for all academics rather than something that should be undertaken by those who have an exceptional talent, a view that was clearly expressed in the Robbins report (1963:184) when it stated that there were ‘many persons of first class ability, particularly in the humanities, who have never engaged in research in the narrow sense or felt any urge to publish, but whose breadth of culture, ripeness of judgement and wide-ranging intellectual curiosity are priceless assets...’. Publication was formerly seen as something for only the most talented, driven or simply vain individuals. Halsey and Trow (1971:328) regarded the desire for publication as class-related with academics from ‘lower-class backgrounds’ more eager to prove themselves in this way. This was not so much an expression of academic snobbery (Halsey was a sociologist with working-class roots) but a sociological speculation. ‘Research’ was understood in

much broader terms especially in the British liberal education tradition as about a critical engagement with the latest thinking in a field of study and its application via teaching in a manner that helped students to learn the ‘discipline of dissent’ (Ashby, 1969:64).

The spread of research evaluation exercises in contexts such as the UK, New Zealand and Hong Kong and cash-for-publication as a means of rewarding academics more directly in mainland - and South Africa has made publication an even higher stakes game. Narrow definitions of ‘research-active’ individually related to high quality publication, grant capture and doctoral completion rates is now being used to determine whether an academic can remain on an all round’ (i.e. teaching and research) contract. If an academic is perceived to be under-performing in any of these respects they face the possibility of being moved onto a ‘teaching-only’ contract as part of the growing periphery on contractually-inferior terms and conditions who work in higher education. These contractual changes have accelerated the division between ‘teaching only and research active staff’ (Oancea, 2019). The liberal definition of research has given way to one that is now based on production of publications, grants, and doctoral graduates. In the process this has transformed understanding of publication as an activity confined to the exceptionally talented – or possibly vainglorious – to one that is an essential baseline performance requirement.

The increased publication productivity of academics in all disciplines means that authorship is now common to all. There have always been authorship abuses in academic life but the pressure to publish is now so great that many ethically dubious authorship practices have become firmly entrenched. This has been encouraged, at

least in part, by the importance now attached to bibliometric indicators to rank, recruit and increasingly promote academics. Co-authorship, always common in the natural and applied sciences, is now the norm in the humanities and social sciences (Macfarlane *et. al.*, 2017). While co-authorship is often presented as an uncomplicated indicator of collaboration, there is an ugly side to the reality of attribution of authorship credit and the ordering of names. Who is named as an author, and whether they are listed as first author in some disciplines, is critical in shaping academic careers and hence the micro-politics of authorship is a minefield where hierarchical power can count for more than intellectual contribution due to the operation of a ‘gift economy’ (Macfarlane, 2017a:1194). A recent analysis of almost 13,000 academic papers revealed that around 48 per cent of the co-authors listed did not satisfy the international standard for authorship laid down by the so-called Vancouver protocol since they did not play a role in the writing (Sauermann and Haeussler, 2017). Increasing competition and performance-based pressures were identified as the most popular explanation for rising levels of co-authorship among humanities and social science authors in an international survey ahead of other factors such as the growth of the internet (Macfarlane, *et al*, 2017). Being a person’s doctoral supervisor for a project can be (fallaciously) regarded by many academics as sufficient qualifications to become an author, regardless of their actual level of intellectual contribution to a publication (Macfarlane, *et al*, 2017). Naming the head of department, laboratory leader or grantholder is also a common but unethical practice (Shaw, 2014). This type of behaviour is the result, at least to some extent, of what Jaspers (1959:79) termed ‘intellectual industrialization’ as large teams come together to produce research.

Gift authorship, the giving of undeserved credit, can be prompted by both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ motives. It is commonly associated with giving an authorship credit to a well-known or influential person whose power and influence may be critical in gaining publication but it can also occur when more senior or influential academics decide to give an authorship credit to a junior or less experienced member of a research group in order to give them a career boost. This has been referred to as ‘gift ordering’ and is related to performance-based pressures that now shape the chances of junior academics in obtaining an appointment or gaining tenure (Macfarlane, 2017a). Such practices, while perhaps motivated by a concern for others without status or power in the academic hierarchy, still represent a deception and an obfuscation of true authorship contribution. Academic cronyism of this type has been further entrenched through the rise of co-authorship across all disciplinary fields, the exponential growth of references per paper, and the almost exclusive dependence on the PhD as the basis for an academic career. Government initiatives to reward research quality have also had corrupting effects, most notably the cash-for-publication policies in mainland China and South Africa.

Referencing practices have also changed quite dramatically evidenced by the rise in the average number of references per academic paper over the last 40 years. In 1970 this figure was just 8.40. Yet by 2005 the figure increased more than four fold to 34.63 (Biglu, 2008). This trend is rarely remarked on in the context of the ethics of academic practice and there are a number of benign explanations that have been put forward to explain this trend such as the increasing use of teams of researchers, the expansion of the academic literature, more awareness of newly published research and so on. However, it is also in all probability linked to the effects of academic cronyism as well as citation counts have become ever more important in evidencing

the academic impact of publications through quantitative indicators such as Google Scholar and Scopus. The increased use of references per paper may further indicate more reliance on reference citations without reading the original publication, a practice that is essentially a form of soft plagiarism. Another possible explanation is that references per paper reflect excessive self-citation and game-playing tactics by authors citing papers previously published by the journal in which they are seeking to publish as a means of boosting their chances of acceptance. This is a practice that, at the same time, helps to raise the journal's impact factor.

There is now a growing emphasis on academics illustrating how their research has the potential to lead to change in society through so-called 'impact' statements contained within research grant applications. Both the Research Council UK and the Australian Research Council requires researchers to include statements in research applications indicating how their research will have such an effect labeled 'Pathways to Impact' and 'Impact Statements', respectively. Such is the importance now attached to obtaining research funds in a hyper-competitive academic environment that the writing of these statements is leading to 'a moral permissiveness and/or elasticity in the authoring of PIS and a sense among funding applicants that to overstate impact claims was an inevitable means to an end in the acquisition of research funds' (Chubb and Watermeyer, 2017: 2364). Exaggerating such claims is now seen as part of 'the game' and means that integrity issues with respect to authorship extend to the generation of research proposals even before any findings are generated or reported.

Conclusion

The death of disinterestedness and the obfuscation of authorship are illustrative of the ways in which neoliberalism is just as much about the practices of academics –

neoliberalism with a small ‘n’ as Ong (2007) has termed it – as the competitive and market-based frameworks established by governments and universities. These ‘migratory practices’ (Ong, 2007:4) are clearly in evidence in the way in which the ethical norms of the academy have shifted. Practices that might have been regarded as ethically dubious by earlier generations of academics, such as grantsmanship or expressions of interestedness, are now regarded as legitimate and positive virtues. In the liberal tradition of British higher education a good deal of skepticism was associated with the pretensions of research: the perils of premature publication and as a blind alley that leads to the narrowing of intellectual interests and the investigation of trivial topics rather than broader philosophical reflection across a broader range of interconnected knowledge. In many respects, research was seen as a narrowing activity that threatened the goal of a liberal education exploring the connectiveness of knowledge. Publication is now regarded as an unqualified virtue as opposed to an activity potentially associated with closed minds, an insufficient commitment to teaching or those with narcissistic tendencies.

Governments and universities now place a much stronger emphasis on the importance of ‘collaboration’ as a means of solving the world’s problems through research. This feeds into traditional, liberal notions of ‘the republic of science’ (Polanyi, 1962:1) whereby academic researchers co-operate in helping to solve the world’s problems. Michael Polanyi’s vision of the republic of science was one where ‘scientists, freely making their own choice of problems and pursuing them in the light of their own personal judgment are in fact cooperating as members of a closely knit organization.’ (Polanyi, 1962:1). However, the *realpolitik* of collaboration in a neoliberal higher education environment is quite different from Polanyi’s republic. Beyond the misty-eyed idealism of Polanyi vision, collaboration is now promoted as a means of

increasing the productivity of academics to meet performance targets. Collaboration is also a benign label that covers up academic cronyism in the reinforcing the power of established and closed networks and parasitical authorship practices involving the exploitation of unacknowledged or marginalised junior researchers (Macfarlane, 2017b). The problems which are deemed worthy of investigation are increasingly prescribed by government, funding bodies and universities through the identification of so-called ‘grand challenges’. These challenges or research themes, such as transformative technology, sustainability, cultural understanding and so on, appear uncontroversial at one level since they seek to represent a moral and social consensus. Yet, they to take ownership of the research agenda away from academics on the mistaken basis that governments and universities can solve the world’s problems by determining what is worth researching. Flexner (1930) argued persuasively that it was essential to preserve the independence and in a positive sense ‘irresponsibility’ of researchers as in solving one problem, advances in science will inevitably create new ones.

Neoliberalism has had significant effects on both students and academic staff. As Archer (2008:282) has found some younger academic staff are ‘conflicted’ about the effects of neoliberalism accepting some changes but seeking to defy or resist other aspects. For members of this generation, though, the assumptions of neoliberalism have largely ‘infiltrated their bodies and minds’ and, as one of Archer’s respondent’s reported ‘can’t imagine doing it any other way’. As a result we are witnessing the inculcation of a number of ethical norms as neoliberal assumptions migrate from the governmental and institutional level to that of the individual academic. **The responsibility to conduct and ‘produce’ research is no longer sufficient; responsibility is now framed in terms of grant capture that recovers the full economic costs incurred**

in research work. Publications are not legitimate unless they are deemed of high quality and appear in a journal with a high impact factor.

Humility in relation to research pretensions is no longer a virtue. The idea of authorship, once regarded as the preserve of the uniquely gifted or conceited, is now a standard part of the performance role of all those who wish to obtain or maintain their status as an academic. Since the rejection of the modernist project to establish universal knowledge claims, the purpose of publication has been altered from the vision of establishing ultimate truths to more limited and pragmatic epistemological and personal objectives. The neoliberal academic **will not openly** question the virtue of grant capture, the legitimacy of the ‘grand challenges’ they bid for, or the questionable authorship practices that have now become commonplace in the hyper-performative academy. They frame the basis of their professional performance and its evaluation and, as a result, **they are required to** embrace these norms as normal and legitimate. **In so doing some may very well be entering into a form of ventriloquism: publicly espousing the values of the marketised academic whilst privately mocking such assumptions; adopting the persona of a ‘flexian’, adept at re-casting ideas in less intellectually challenging terms for policy audiences (Smith, 2012). It may also, sadly, be evidence of complicity with a competitive, ‘win-at-all-costs’ mentality that is becoming an all too evident feature of behaviour in academic life (Chubb and Watermeyer, 2017; Watermeyer and Tomlinson, 2018).**

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ⁱ Communism, Universalism, Disinterestedness, Organised Skepticism